

# Beer for Breakfast?

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It was at university when I was first introduced to the idea of cracking open a beer in the morning. No, it's not what you're thinking. Cheap beer wasn't the first order of the day. At least, not for me - studying in Cheltenham as I was, scenes of middle aged gents, in town for the races, knocking back cans of Carling at half nine on a weekday were a common sight.

You probably had the same reaction as I did - first the horror, then the interrogative: why isn't this socially acceptable anymore?

In earlier times, ale and beer were drunk at any given time of day. Here's a passage in C. Anne Wilson's *Food and Drink in Britain*, which describes

the typical breakfast served up to members of the family of Henry Algernon Percy, the fifth Earl of Northumberland, in about 1512: 'First a loaf of bread in trenchers, 2 manchets, a quart of beer, a quart of wine, 2 pieces of salted fish, 6 baconned herring, 4 white herring or a dish of sprats.'

This is, obviously, privileged gluttony at its peak. But throughout human history, beer as the beverage of choice was part of the morning routine, no matter your status in society. Joan Alcock's *Food in the Ancient World* documents how even the poorest labourers in the earliest of civilisations - in this case Ancient Egypt - consumed the likes of bread, onions,



and beer before upping for work.

This wasn't always the case. In Europe during the Middle Ages, people generally didn't break their fast at all. Especially those of Catholic faith, as it was seen as an overindulgence; a sin. In fact, if you were observed eating in the morning, it was assumed you'd have lofty appetites for other things, such as ale or wine.

Catholics still accepted beer. Just in moderation. By modern standards, they may have a point. As no doubt you've experienced, most modern beer - from your West Coast IPAs to your imperial stouts - is fairly unpalatable first thing in the morning anyway. Particularly if you've just brushed your teeth. Which is probably why ale, unhoped and at a low ABV as it was originally, came to be so ubiquitous an inclusion in breakfast spreads throughout history.

Until beer came along, that is. Ale was at the core of the British diet for hundreds of years, when various herbs like rosemary, yarrow, or betony were added as flavouring. It took a while before all were eschewed for the ideal herb - the hop - as introduced by Flemish brewers who'd settled in London in the 9th century. Mild, lightly-hopped

beers would be 'taken warm early in the day as a morning draught' well into the latter part of the 18th century.

But in 1748, beer had a new rival. High grain prices had begun to affect the cost and quality of beer. Due to this new expense, tea became a cheap alternative for the middle and lower classes, and the government could no longer tax it as luxury goods. By the end of the 18th century, tea had become the national drink. 'Tea drinking had become widespread in Scotland too,'

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writes Wilson. 'And by the 1740s tea had very generally replaced ale or spirits as the morning draught.' It's a similar story for coffee which, in the 16th century, was seen as a necessary 'evacuation of superfluities', and subsequently became widely consumed as a morning pick-me-up.

Besides those aforementioned Carlsberg-quaffing race punters, there's not much indication beer has returned to the morning routine. Not in the UK, at least. But these things come and go, right? Bloody Marys and Bucks Fizz has been doing the rounds for decades, so why not ditto that with beer? Trappist

monks, while they fasted for Lent, would call beer their 'liquid bread', so perhaps a bottle of Westmalle Tripel - or maybe La Trappe's lower ABV Blonde would be more sensible - is the way to kick off a working day? Bavarians still break their fast with a wheat beer alongside their pretzels and weisswurst. Do we take their lead? Or perhaps we should forget the brown sauce in favour of a brown ale with our bacon butties? A coffee porter alongside your Full English, sir or madam, for your daily requirement of carbs in one go? During the early medieval period, Celtic bodyguards were paid in mead, which they'd drink whenever they got half a chance, no matter what the time of day. Dare we take the same approach with the Gosnell's finest? Or should we go back to our roots and sip subtly hopped ales like Harvey's Knots of May or Hogshead's Barge's Mild?

I don't know about you, but summer's warm embrace puts me off having tea or coffee. Then there's the problem of finding cartoned orange juice which actually tastes like orange juice - almost impossible a task. Perhaps there's only one thing for it...

